
Philadelphia Regional Fund Success Story

Old St. Joseph's Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



A view from Willings Alley toward the courtyard and church.

Photos Courtesy of Milner + Carr Conservation, LLC

The Philadelphia Regional Fund awarded a \$100,000 grant to Old St. Joseph's Historic Preservation Corporation to conserve the historic brick walls of the church and rectory, as part of a successful \$1.6 million capital campaign completed in late 2006.

A Historic Structure

Nestled among the brick townhouses and narrow cobblestone streets of Philadelphia's Society Hill neighborhood sits the oldest Catholic church in the city, Old St. Joseph's.

In the early years, parishioners of St. Joseph's met in a small house chapel. Eventually, the congregation expanded to need a second, larger church in 1757, and consecrated the present structure in 1839. The church stands among three other historic components on the property: the

1789 clergy house, the 1851 college (the predecessor to today's 7,700-student St. Joseph's University in West Philadelphia), and the central courtyard.

A Legacy of Outreach

Over the past two and half centuries, St. Joseph's established a number of wide-reaching charities and services. To serve the city's poor and immigrant population, St. Joseph's founded St. Joseph's Hospital in 1849 and the Philadelphia St. Vincent De Paul Society in 1851. Additionally, the Jesuits founded a liberal arts college on the property in 1851, which soon outgrew the Willings Alley location and eventually moved its current 65-acre campus in 1929. In the past two decades, the Carewalk and Outreach Center for the Homeless, the Committee for the Children of Gesu School in North Philadelphia, and the Michael Taylor Fund for Victims of AIDS programs were established. Today, the charitable work of St. Joseph's continues: nearly 20% of its yearly budget is dedicated to the care of the poor, sick and otherwise disadvantaged. And, as a nationally significant historic house of worship, the building is open to visitors.

The building is well preserved, due to the dedication of the congregation to protect its corner of historic Philadelphia. The congregation's passion for stewardship was formalized in 1992 with the creation of the Old St. Joseph's Historic Preservation Corporation (HPC). HPC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting public understanding of the significance of Old St. Joseph's in shaping America's religious, intellectual, civic and cultural history since its founding in 1733.

Old Saint Joseph's Meets Partners for Sacred Places

Bobbie Burke is a parishioner, founding member of HPC, and a trained architectural historian. Burke explains that HPC's early fundraisers were small-scale events like house parties and outreach to parishioners. "There was a realization by the parishioners that the historical structures were significant to the community and the region in their history, and the kind of maintenance and preservation needed would outstrip the resources of the individual parishioners."

The first restoration project undertaken was the renovation of the sacristy and the first floor, because Burke says, "those are things people first see when they walk off the street." HPC worked to repair and renovate high-visibility areas for several years, but with no long-range plans.

Enter Partners for Sacred Places. Old St. Joseph's connected with Partners shortly after its founding in 1989. The relationship was a two-way street from the beginning. Eventually, Partners influenced HPC's fundraising initiatives, and HPC's success creating a nonprofit for stewardship purposes was documented by Partners and shared with other congregations.

In 2000, HPC board members realized that years of deferred maintenance necessitated a facilities management plan, and hired architectural firm DPK&A to evaluate structural and mechanical systems. The result was a comprehensive facilities report, with some alarming news: the wooden roof trusses and ceiling of the 1839 church were in danger of collapsing. Although the board had not been prepared for this crisis, "some of the

members of the board felt like getting this report was the best thing we ever did,” says Burke.

Crisis as a Catalyst

The congregation closed the church and moved its services in 2001 due to the failing trusses and roof. HPC hired Keast and Hood Engineering to design new steel trusses to be installed in the attic. During the ten months of restoration work, HPC provided stayed in constant touch with the congregation via a weekly column for the Sunday bulletin. Drawing on the minutes of the 1838-39 building committee, each column gave parishioners information about the history of the church. The empty sanctuary made it easy to apply for an emergency grant from Preservation Pennsylvania to preserve the stained glass above the altar. This relatively inexpensive project was highly visible and buoyed spirits. Burke recalls, “We had a liturgical celebration for the rededication, and displays in the church of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ with photographs of the truss repairs. It was a very festive return, almost simultaneous with the parish’s decision to have a capital campaign.”

Overall, the work was divided into two phases. Phase I included the emergency roof truss repair and replacement, a total cost of \$1.5 million. Phase 2 consisted of painting and refurbishing the church, a new parish kitchen, and repairing the parish hall over the course of a year. For Phase 2, a capital campaign goal was set at \$1.6 million. HPC hired a fundraising consultant, Federico & Cummings, who created a feasibility study, funded by the Raskob Foundation, and set up teams of parishioners to approach others about giving towards the restoration.

Burke believes that this capital campaign was a galvanizing moment for the congregation. “The parishioners became stakeholders... this was a transforming experience for them.” During this time, the neighborhood had also been designated a historic district, and St. Joseph’s was listed as a significant building.

Father Mark Horak, Old St. Joe’s pastor, says that the biggest

accomplishment of HPC is the \$3 million that has been spent on urgently needed repairs, all from fund raising and grants. If the parish had been compelled to borrow money, he says, it could have compromised its outreach programs. When asked why he believes it’s been so successful in receiving support from its parishioners, he answers, “We’ve worked very hard in making people feel like this is their parish. And when people feel that this is something that belongs to them as part of their family life, they support it, as they do their families.”

Long Range Vision

“When we did our capital campaign, it was a spontaneous thing because of the emergency truss repair. It knocked everybody for a loop,” Burke explains. “The parish came through and it was a successful campaign. Now HPC must prepare a long-range plan for interpretation and preservation of the site.”

Partners for Sacred Places and the Keystone Grant Program of the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission awarded a grant to Old St. Joseph’s in 2005. The exterior masonry of the church and rectory, comprised of 18th century handmade brick, was in need of serious repair. In order to meet the conditions of the new grant to restore the historic masonry, HPC readjusted its fundraising vision to include more outside sources.

To complement its grant-making, Partners provided two peer-learning training sessions in which seasoned congregations share fundraising practices with less-experienced congregations. Partners invited HPC and similar nonprofits connected to other historic congregations. “Those meetings were Godsend to us, because we were feeling a little bit alone,” says Burke, “Receiving this grant, being counseled by Partners, connecting with other 501(c)(3)s and benefiting from the financial analysis from the Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF) are tangible benefits of our contact with Partners.” The nonprofit business financial analysis identifies the strengths and weakness of a nonprofit’s financial plan, which the NFF uses to project the organization’s growth and sustainability.

“I can’t tell you how important Partners has been to us,” Burke shares. “They explained the necessity of having 5-10 year plans, and the necessity for doing long-range programs. We’ve always felt that Partners was right there with us, all the time with everything we needed to do.”



Milner + Carr Conservation, LLC at work.

If you have questions about the Philadelphia Regional Fund for Sacred Places, please contact Erin Coryell, Director of the Philadelphia Regional Fund, at 215-567-3234, ext. 18 or ecoryell@sacredplaces.org